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The Importance of Latin: Conference on Medieval Latin

Posted on 07/08/2013 by John Cairns



(Images of Bede and George Buchanan courtesy of Wikipedia Commons)

According to the Venerable Bede, the language that linked the varied peoples who inhabited Britain and Ireland was Latin. In a legal history blog such as this, there is little need to remind readers of the importance of a knowledge of Latin for historical study. Yet it is now sadly neglected in most British schools – a cruel denial of opportunity to many (most?) of Britain's young people.

For most historical research in Scotland, certainly before 1800, it is necessary to have a knowledge of Latin. The legal system generated Latin documents. Lawyers relied on books in Latin. University teaching was in Latin in Scotland until well into the eighteenth century. In the Middle Ages, Scottish statutes were in Latin. In reality, Roman law, with its rich heritage of medieval and early modern literature – in Latin – is part of Scots legal history. Very little of this material has been or ever will be translated. This means that research students often have to devote significant time to mastering at least the rudiments of the language: much tougher than when one is a schoolgirl or schoolboy. But it means that unless one is engaged in advanced study, access to the cultural riches of our past will be forever denied to most.

Apart from such immediate and practical importance, study of Latin – and indeed Classics generally – broadens the mind through engagement with other cultures, which profoundly influenced our own, but which were also very different. A few years ago, it was suggested that school pupils should learn about “citizenship” – whatever the advantages this may have had over a good dose of history, German, chemistry, mathematics, and so on, one cannot but reflect that to learn about citizenship, what can be better than reading Cicero?

When your blogger, quite a few years ago, was advising school pupils at an open day, he was asked what subjects it would be best to study to prepare for studying law; he gave the general – and true – party line, that all subjects were a good preparation. When pressed further, for his personal opinion, he reluctantly suggested that the highers to be taken should include history, English, Latin, and a modern language. He was met with the quite astonishing remark that they could not take Latin, as Latin was “elitist”. Your blogger was sufficiently taken aback by this remark that he did not have the presence of mind to ask what it meant. He is still puzzled. Did these perfectly nice young people not realize that, at one level, preparing to sit five highers already marked them out as an elite. Did they simply mean it was something they associated with “posh” schools? I suspect it was. But again this is an

astonishing attitude. Clearly being “elite” was a bad thing; Latin was “elitist”; *ergo*, Latin was a “bad thing”. Is excellence to be despised?

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Who now will read and appreciate George Buchanan, tutor to James VI, who was reputed the greatest Latin poet of his age? Who remembers Ruddiman?

When your blogger was a schoolboy himself, his Latin master successfully explained the use of “ille” in Latin – which was troubling your blogger – by reference to the Latin translation of A A Milne’s *Winnie the Pooh* by Alexander Lenard as *Winnie Ille Pu*. Other such charming and amusing translations exist: Brian Staples translated *The House at Pooh Corner* as *Domus Anguli Puensis*. More recently, and with a nice Edinburgh connection, the first two of J K Rowling’s Harry Potter novels were translated into Latin by Peter Needham as *Harrius Potter et Philosophi Lapis* and *Harrius Potter et Camera Secretorum*. The Rowling Harry Potter novels were filled with Latin; but, alas, they have not led to a Latin revival – indeed there are probably no longer sufficient trained teachers to avoid it being anything other than a minority subject. The GTC still counts it as a core subject in Scotland; yet for several years it has not been possible to train as a Latin teacher in Scotland. One wonders is this just another example of the *trahison des clercs* of the generation of 68? Or is this too simple? But certainly as soon as universities started no longer to require specific subjects, such as Latin, schools stopped teaching them, perhaps because they were perceived to be difficult, and were unfashionable.

This takes us back to the venerable Bede. One hundred years ago, a new dictionary for medieval Latin was proposed. This year, the final fascicule of the *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* is published. These events are being marked a conference, “Latin in medieval Britain: Sources, Language, Lexicography” in Oxford, 12-14 December, 2013. To book, and for more information: www.dmlbs.ox.ac.uk/conference-2013



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